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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines Florida's efforts toward improving its present educational system through increased emphasis on essential learning outcomes. After an introductory section, which notes some of the legislative steps and planning activities undertaken in support of this goal, the paper outlines six conditions that Florida's postsecondary institutions are demanding from their faculty, staff, and students. These conditions stress improved preparation and abilities from college-bound students, stricter entrance standards for colleges and universities and for community college transfer programs, increased demands for higher levels of performance, a revision of the financial support process to promote higher academic standards, and the identification of a core curriculum by community colleges and four-year colleges, which emphasizes communication, mathematics, and logical inquiry. After reviewing some of the actions taken by Florida's postsecondary institutions to satisfy these conditions, the paper summarizes the nine recommendations of the Postsecondary Education Planning Commission for implementing State Board of Education Rule 6A-10.30, which calls for student completion of a prescribed amount of course work in reading, writing, and communication skills. These recommendations specify the basic skills expected of students and pedagogical methods for teaching these skills. The paper concludes by underscoring the individual institution's responsibilities for implementing these recommendations. (HB)

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Legislative Influence on Curriculum: A Case Study of the State of Florida's Problems

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Legislative Influence on Curriculum: A Case Study of the State of Florida's Problems

We are at a point in Florida where the off stated goal to improve quality education requires specific action. The State Board of Education, the Governor, the Commissioner of Education, and the Florida Legislature, specially state Senator Jack Gordon, have led the efforts toward improving our present education system.

Under the Leadership of the Commissioner of Education, Ralph Turlington, postsecondary education is beginning to place more emphasis on essential learning outcomes than before. State Senator Jack Gordon has performed a commendable service in calling attention to the need for more specific and accelerated moves toward reaching the high quality goal. He has put the spotlight squarely on the first and most fundamental move of all, solving for Florida what appears to be a national crisis in student literacy and mathematical skills. His approved proposal by the Florida State Board of Education (rule 6A-10.30) calls for student completion of a prescribed amount of coursework in reading, writing, and computational skills. The Postsecondary Education Planning Commission established in 1980 to develop a master plan for higher education agreed wholeheartedly with Senator Gordon's call for action. However, the Commission strongly recommended that the nature of action, its planning details, and its fulfillment are matters strictly for the academic institutions to assume as their direct and immediate responsibility.

The response to Senator Gordon's proposal by a number of institutions shows

that most institutions share his concern and have in some instances taken first steps to deal with this critical situation. Miami-Dade Community College is a prime example, yet the important point that must be stressed is that each community college and university should be allowed to develop their own alternatives in solving the problem; they are the ones ultimately responsible and accountables for their success or failure.

New Academic Reforms

The improvement of quality in postsecondary education depends on the degree of rigor with which teaching and learning are undertaken. Able and committed faculty are the key to insistence on such academic reforms, challenging students and working closely with them in developing abilities that have always been Hallmarks of the educated person. These start with the abilities to communicate through the spoken and written word and to handle fundamental mathematics. They continue with the capacities for logical thinking, for inquiry, and for critical judgement. Such abilities and capacities are developed only through strenuous, unceasing, and monitored practice. There is no way to short-cut this exacting process. Furthermore, the results should be assessed not merely by course completions but by demonstrations of competence.

Across the State of Florida, institutions are demanding from their faculty, staff, and students several related conditions, each which is necessary but not sufficient in and of itself to produce the desired result:

1. Students expecting to enter postsecondary education (and especially university work) should have better preparation and ability to profit from a more demanding educational environment.

2. Entrance standards should be based on a frank recognition that not all students are prepared for the academic challenges of college and university work. Increased academic rigor is possible only when students can meet higher expectations. Those who cannot but are motivated to learn should be guided to programs outside the universities where they can remedy their deficiencies and reassess their potential as students.

3. Higher standards are desirable for students who seek to enter the college-parallel programs at community colleges. Students in community colleges should have to meet these higher standards before formally being accepted in college transfer programs. Along with the higher standards on specific essential skills, more effective counseling and diagnostic testing should provide the basis for placing a student. Students whose levels of achievement of communication and computational skills are below established standard should be limited to compensatory courses and any other instruction for which they are deemed adequately prepared.

4. Faculties should demand more from students who are admitted under the recommended stricter criteria. The levels of performance expected should be made clear and thus performance standards will be established.

5. The financial support process should be revised so that higher academic standards and increased rigor of teaching and learning are encouraged. Because it is likely that fewer students will qualify for the difficult academic challenges, at least for a time, institutions should be assured that they will not lose resources as standards are raised. Lower student-faculty ratios are bound to occur in many pro-

grams, making possible a closer relationship between student and teacher. State financing policy should support state academic goals, making it clear that quality will be rewarded.

6. Colleges and universities should take steps to identify a core curriculum, which reflects the intended emphasis on communication, mathematics, and logical inquiry skills. In addition, essential areas of knowledge in the social sciences should be represented in such a core. This revised view of general education should be coordinated with the secondary schools so that high school students know what content and standards will be expected at each level of education. These clearer expectations will encourage secondary schools to emphasize key content and skills and will make learning more continuous and integrated in the progression from secondary to postsecondary education.

As a result, higher freshman admission standards are being proposed across the state for the universities. Efforts are being made to raise the academic content of high school curricula. As an example, Florida State University recently raised its admissions requirements significantly. Miami-Dade Community College as well as other community colleges across the state are taking steps to identify early those students who are not ready to attempt the college-parallel curriculum. The essential academic skills test now being developed (C.L.A.S.T.) will provide a way to limit transfer to upper level work to only those students who can meet the higher standard efficiently.

The postsecondary education community in Florida under the leadership of Commissioner Turlington and with the support of the State Board of Education recently compiled a list of essential academic skills and is now developing an assessment program to monitor their development. Along with this is a growing recognition that

changes in teaching and in curricula are needed if the student performance in these skills is to be improved significantly. Presently the universities and community colleges are reviewing the extent to which current coursework is related to the essential academic skills. This will hopefully give Florida officials an idea of the number of students in all institutions which have the background to profit from a higher quality of education.

Unfortunately the major problem is in the area of finance and budget where little progress has been made. Financing is still based on the number of FTE's (full-time equivalent) students an institution has. Moreover, the actual budgets of universities and community colleges continue to place less resources at the undergraduate level and on teaching in general. Current student-faculty ratios in universities as well as in community colleges continue to be above those found in quality institutions around the nation. Maybe the first step in improving quality education in Florida should be to reduce those ratios.

State Board of Education Rule 6A-10.30

The rule in itself provides a vehicle for expressing policy mainly because of its clear intent to increase the amount of student and teacher time spent on writing and mathematics. It offers one model requiring additional English and mathematics courses, but it also makes it possible for institutions to develop their own plans for achieving the intent. Therefore, the chief value of the rule is to emphasize the need to place the initiative with the institutions where it belongs.

The following points summarize the Postsecondary Education Planning Commission's specific recommendations to the Gordon Rule:

1. The recently defined list of essential performance skills and the associated testing program should remain a high priority and central to the focus on undergraduate

education. However, a stronger emphasis at the teaching and curricular level is also necessary. It is not an either-or situation. Both are required to assure that threshold standards are met and, just as important, to assure that all students are encouraged and able to develop their creative skills to their full potential that is, beyond the minimum standards. All institutions should identify ways to improve the extent to which teaching, coursework, and learning develop the essential academic skills.

2. The essential skills should be recognized more broadly as communications, logical thinking, and critical inquiry skills as well as English and mathematical competencies. This more accurately reflects the intent of the essential skills definitions passed earlier by the State Board. The broader definition implies that a more comprehensive set of teaching approaches and course content may be used effectively.

3. Teaching and learning the essential skills may be largely folded into the entire range of the curriculum wherever possible. While not easily achieved, this calls on faculty in all disciplines to insist on acceptable standards of writing within their own courses. This method is preferable to adding or substituting more "skill courses" such as English composition because:

    a. More total time and effort would be given to the development of basic skills.

    b. Fewer personnel and curricular changes would be required.

    c. Flexibility in institutional approaches would be prompted.

    d. Students learn more readily when dealing with subjects relating to their interests.

4. Colleges and universities should take the lead in emphasizing the basic skills because this will stimulate similar action in the elementary and secondary schools as they adjust their curriculum to prepare students for the new focus in the colleges. While the improvement of undergraduate education must be addressed by all of education--postsecondary and K-12-- it cannot await and be totally dependent on similar improvement in the K-12 sector. It will be more effective for the colleges to move first and by example establish standards that may guide subsequent improvements in the lower schools. These in turn may lead to further enhancement of quality in the colleges.

5. Institutions should take the lead in developing better alternatives for getting faculty and students to spend more time on the important academic skills. Different students, faculty and background make for wide diversity among institutions. This diversity should be recognized by encouraging individual plans.

6. Each institution should be expected to develop plans for meeting these goals within a specified time--short enough so that immediate attention will be given but long enough to enable sound plans to be made.

7. The State Board of Education should provide criteria which may be used by the institutions to plan and by the Board to approve alternate plans offered by each institution. The Department of Education should develop these criteria through consultation with the Board of Regents, the Community College Coordinating Board and the Postsecondary Education Planning Commission. These criteria should reflect the specific intent of proposed State Board of Education Rule 6A-10.30 which is to provide more teaching and learning time on writing and computational tasks. However, the criteria

also should express the need to emphasize a broader array of student competencies and curricular opportunities which relate to communication, logical thinking, and critical inquiry. In accordance with its advisory responsibility to the State Board of Education, the Commission should review the criteria and recommend appropriate actions to the Board.

8. These criteria should be developed immediately and where possible utilize the elements of exemplary curricula now in place.

9. Institutional plans should be financed within existing revenues wherever possible. Testimony received by the Commission has indicated that many institutions already have activities which satisfy the intent of the proposed rule. Those institutions which conclude that additional resources are necessary to implement their plans should fully document that need to the State Board. Additional funding for these plans should be given priority in community college and university budget requests.

CONCLUSION

There is a great need to improve the quality of education in Florida and across the nation; however, a great deal of effort is needed to achieve this goal. Campuses across the nation are beginning to put more emphasis on their students having a great knowledge of such skills as reading, writing, communication, and mathematics. In Florida the Postsecondary Education Planning Commission was established to develop a master plan for postsecondary education that among other things will help institutions achieve this goal, yet in this plan the Commission recommends and strongly supports the concept that each institution should be allowed to set up their own methods of teaching these skills to their students.

These skills must be taught with rigor in order for the students to learn successfully. Along with the basic reading, writing, and arithmetic skills, capacities for logic, inquiry, and judgement must also be taught. All these skills, however, can only be mastered through unceasing, monitored practice. As a result of these higher standards, postsecondary institutions across the state are raising their standards for freshman admissions; therefore, forcing high schools and community colleges to teach these skills more intensly.

Finally, we must remember that most important factor in achieving this goal is the student, and there must be changes in teaching and curriculum if the the students' performance is to improve. Only time will tell.

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